

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Chesmon Butterfield 1835-1881

Between 1871 and 1881 Chesmon Butterfield worked as an architect and builder in Waterville, designing and constructing several homes there. Coming from a modest rural background, he gained professional prominence in one of Maine's major industrial towns.

Butterfield was born in the Kennebec County farming community of Sidney on April 1, 1835, the

fourth child of Joseph and Nancy Butterfield.¹ As a carpenter, Joseph presumably started teaching his son the trade in his early teens. At the same time Chesmon began his lifelong service in the Methodist church, which would lead him to become a lay minister and eventually an ordained deacon. By 1855 young Butterfield was sufficiently established as a carpenter in Sidney to marry Elizabeth H. Sawtelle, who was from a local family.²

For the next sixteen years Chesmon and Elizabeth Butterfield lived in Sidney, raising their family of five children. During this period Chesmon continued to pursue his trade. While little is known of his educa-



Figure 1. Jonas Gray House, Waterville, 1991 view (MHPC).



Figure 2. Daniel Wing House, Waterville, circa 1890 view (MHPC).

tion, either personal or professional, one document from 1866 indicates that he was an intelligent and articulate individual. On February 6th of that year Butterfield wrote a letter on roofing to the *Maine Farmer*, a weekly newspaper in Augusta. In it he discussed the merits of current roofing methods and materials, wisely noting that "a good roof is a matter of no small account in building in these parts, where we have rain, snow and sleet to fight against."³

In 1871 Chesmon Butterfield and his family moved to Waterville. There for the remaining ten years of his life he maintained an active practice as an architect and builder. He promoted his services as a designer through newspaper advertisements in the *Waterville Mail* which warned "Don't Build Without a Plan!" and advised that with drawings "you can then build so much cheaper, and better, that the plans will save you many times their cost"⁴ (Figure 3).

At least four Waterville men responded to Chesmon Butterfield's advice by commissioning him to plan frame houses for them. The first of these was Reuben B. Dunn, one of the town's leading businessmen. In 1875 Dunn engaged Butterfield to design and construct a two and a half story residence on Pleasant Place off Pleasant Street. Built for resale, its gable ended facade and side hall plan reflected the Greek Revival building tradition of Butterfield's early years, while the Italianate bay windows and bracketed cornice were strictly up-to-date. On September 10, 1875, the *Waterville Mail* commented that Butterfield's involvement in Dunn's project was "sufficient

guarantee that it will be tasteful in design and full of ingenious convenience."

The Dunn House was completed by April, 1876.⁵ That summer Chesmon Butterfield received two more domestic commissions, homes for Daniel R. Wing on College Street and Jonas Gray on Silver Street. In both cases Butterfield supplied the plans and turned the construction over to local contractors, probably reflecting the demands of his expanding architectural practice.

Described as being "of a somewhat unique pattern", the rectangular main block of the Wing House was two and a half stories with a hipped roof, from which a large gable projected at the south end⁶ (Figure 2). The College Avenue elevation was dominated by a pair of two story bay windows that were crowned by roof dormers. The main entrance was located at the south end, adjacent to which extended a sizeable two story hipped roof wing. Exterior detailing included pairs of Italianate brackets.

Jonas Gray's house was more modest in scale and more correct in style than either Reuben Dunn's or Daniel Wing's⁷ (Figure 1). This handsome two story dwelling displays an asymmetrical L-shaped plan characteristic of mid-nineteenth century Italianate architecture. Features of the style are seen in the squared bay window, the bracketed porch, the rusticated corner detailing, the arched attic window, and the pronounced roof cornice.

As the Wing and Gray houses neared completion early in 1877, Chesmon Butterfield was asked by L. Dunbar to design "a large and handsome house" at the corner of Main and North Streets.⁸ Again Butterfield's role was limited to furnishing the plans with the actual construction left to a local contracting firm. While still standing, the Dunbar House has been totally altered, giving no hint of its original appearance.

In 1879 Reuben Dunn erected Waterville's largest business block at the foot of Main Street. While Dunn employed the Portland architect Francis H. Fassett to design this massive four story brick building, he entrusted Chesmon Butterfield with supervising its construction. Butterfield was also responsible for all of the carpentry, including designing the inside finish and locating the plumbing. This was no small task, considering that the Dunn Block contained six stores, one market, eighteen offices, two 33 by 63 foot meeting rooms, and a 400 seat hall. As the building approached completion in February, 1880, Dunn commented to the press "in very marked emphasis of the satisfaction Mr. Butterfield has given" for his part in the project.⁹

That spring Chesmon Butterfield's health began to fail, and he died a year later on June 12, 1881, at the age of forty-six. During his decade in Waterville, he had earned the community's respect to the point that

DON'T BUILD WITHOUT A PLAN!

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C. BUTTERFIELD,
Residence on College St., Waterville, Me.
just north of the Depot. 3m9*

Figure 3. Butterfield Advertisement, *Waterville Mail*, August 21, 1874.

the *Waterville Mail* eulogized him as "a very worthy man, a good citizen, an ingenious and capable mechanic, and his qualifications as a tasteful architect are shown in many buildings in our village. His works praise him."¹⁰

Butterfield was the son of a rural carpenter, and he passed the family trade on to his eldest son William M. Butterfield.¹¹ At an early age William was taught the essentials of design and construction. This instruction, coupled with practical experience on his father's projects, equipped William to take a foreman's job at the age of sixteen with Moses C. Foster, Waterville's leading contractor. In 1879 Foster placed young Butterfield in charge of building the grand Wentworth Hotel at Newcastle, New Hampshire.¹²

William Butterfield left Moses Foster in 1880 to form his own contracting firm in Concord, Massachusetts.¹³ In March, 1881, he opened an architect's office in Manchester, New Hampshire, where he would practice until his death in 1932.¹⁴ Thus, Chesmon Butterfield lived to see his son, not yet twenty-one, established in the architectural profession. During the next fifty years William Butterfield would spread the family name across New England with buildings in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island.

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr.

NOTES

1. Sidney Vital Records, Births.
2. Sidney Vital Records, Marriages. Chesman Butterfield and Elizabeth H. Sawtelle were married on April 27, 1855 by Rev. Thomas J. True.
3. See also Butterfield's letter entitled "Roofs and Roofing" in the October 8, 1875 *Waterville Mail*.
4. *Waterville Mail*, August 21, 1874.
5. *Ibid.*, April 21, 1876.
6. *Ibid.*, February 16, 1877.
7. *Ibid.*, September 1, 1876.
8. *Ibid.*, August 4, 1876; February 23, 1877.
9. *Ibid.*, February 6, 1880.
10. *Ibid.*, June 17, 1881; June 24, 1881.
11. G. A. Cheney, "William M. Butterfield, A New Hampshire Architect and His Work," *The Granite Monthly*, March 1903, pp. 145-52.
12. *Waterville Mail*, May 9, 1879.
13. *Ibid.*, June 4, 1880.
14. *Ibid.*, March 11, 1881.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY CHESMON BUTTERFIELD

- Reuben B. Dunn House, Pleasant Place, Waterville, 1875-76, Extant
- Jonas Gray House, Silver Street, Waterville, 1876-77, Extant
- Daniel R. Wing House, College Avenue, Waterville, 1876-77, Destroyed
- L. Dunbar House, Main Street, Waterville, 1877, Altered

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